

Planning Update #2

ALE Reserve Comprehensive Conservation Plan Underway

BACKGROUND

This is the second of four Planning Updates to be prepared as part of the Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) being developed for the Fitzner-Eberhardt Arid Lands Ecology (ALE) Reserve.

For those of you who are new to our mailing list and have not read the previous Update, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and its consultant, EDAW, Inc. (the Planning Team) embarked on a 14-month planning process in November 1998. Ultimately, a management plan will be developed with guidelines for making future decisions regarding the use and management of the ALE Reserve. This Update outlines FWS mandates, policies, and boundary issues for the ALE Reserve; describes the progress to date on the CCP and associated Environmental Assessment (EA); summarizes the results of the input we received from the public, interest groups, agencies, and tribes; and provides information on the elk population and potential future management strategies.

Defining a Refuge - Boundaries, Purpose, and Compatibility

The ALE Reserve is unique in many ways, including its status as a Research Natural Area which carries with it certain requirements for management. The FWS is also unique as a land management agency, with specific land management guidelines and procedures. Because of the specific laws that guide the FWS refuge program, any use that is to occur on a refuge must be evaluated for how it affects, or is compatible with, the primary purpose of the refuge. This is the standard by which the ALE Reserve will be managed if it is formally adopted into the refuge system through the planning process.



The Planning Team atop Rattlesnake Mountain

By law, a compatible use means an activity that "in the sound professional judgement of the Director, will not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the mission of the System or the purpose of the refuge." This is an important concept for any refuge manager. As the planning process for the ALE Reserve has shown, there are many diverse issues to deal with from day to day. However, there is only one standard for evaluation - any use must not prevent the FWS from meeting its stated mission and specific refuge purpose. The refuge system mission is defined in law, but the stated purpose of any refuge varies, depending upon how the refuge was created. This can be done by an act of Congress, by executive order, or through a public planning process, such as developing a CCP.

For the ALE Reserve, that purpose statement is being formed right now in the planning process. Through the CCP, the FWS will define its refuge boundary. In other words, it will decide what area it will administer under an existing set of laws, rules, and regulations. For example, the FWS may evaluate whether to include McGee Ranch and the Riverlands units of the Hanford Site within the proposed refuge boundary, in case they become available in the future, or whether contaminated sites or developed sites with facilities

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should be excluded from the boundary. After completion of the plan, proposed uses within the refuge will always be evaluated for compatibility against that purpose statement. All of the goals and objectives in the CCP will directly support the stated purpose of the refuge.

This process for evaluating refuge uses and activities is of the utmost importance to the FWS. It is designed to facilitate uses, but to also make sure we always put wildlife and habitat first.

PROGRESS ON THE CCP

Since the last Planning Update, the Planning Team has been busy working on various tasks related to preparing the CCP for the ALE Reserve. To date, we have accomplished the following:

- Identified issues to be addressed in the CCP;
- Held a technical workshop to provide information on the resources on the ALE Reserve;
- Prepared the resource inventory sections of the CCP and affected environment portions of the EA; and
- Developed the purpose and goals for the CCP.

A summary of each of these accomplishments is provided below.

Issue Identification - We held an Open House and Public Meeting on January 14 to identify issues related to the ALE Reserve. At that meeting, and

from the completed response forms included in the first Planning Update, we received a great deal of public input, as well as written comments from various interest groups and agencies. We have also met with several agencies, tribes, and interest groups to understand their issues of concern related to the future of the ALE Reserve. A summary of public, agency, tribal, and interest group input to the issue identification process is included in this Planning Update.

Technical Workshop - To assist with the development of goals, objectives, and strategies related to ecological conditions and processes on the ALE Reserve, we held a Technical Workshop with biologists who have in-depth knowledge of the ALE Reserve and its habitats. The Workshop took place on March 3 and provided us with information on the natural resources of the ALE Reserve, ongoing monitoring programs, past research study locations, noxious weed populations and recent control efforts, fire history, and elk management. Workshop participants also offered suggestions for future restoration programs, monitoring, and public education and interpretative opportunities.

Resource Inventory/Affected Environment - Because of its previously established status as a buffer for the Hanford Nuclear Reservation and its designation both as a Research Natural Area and as a National Environmental Research Park, there is a wealth of information on the resources of the ALE Reserve. The inventory of these resources will serve as a foundation for decision-making in developing the CCP. To date, we have summarized much of this information and are preparing the following resource inventory sections of the CCP and affected environment portions of the EA for the ALE Reserve:

Biological Resources	Public Health and Safety
Climate and Air Quality	Socioeconomics
Hydrology	Recreation Resources
Geology, Soils, and Erosion	Visual Resources
Cultural Resources	Environmental Justice



Rocky Mountain Elk

If you drive along SR 240 adjacent to the ALE Reserve you may be lucky enough to find elk (*Cervus elphus*) grazing in the grasslands. These elk are a relatively recent addition to the local landscape. During the winter of 1972, a small band of Rocky Mountain elk wandered from the foothills of the Cascade Mountains and found their way to the ALE Reserve; several stayed and reproduced. With no large predators, little human disturbance, ample open space, and plenty of forage, the elk herd steadily grew. The Rattlesnake Herd, as it is called, occupies the ALE Reserve, the United States Army's Yakima Training Center, and adjacent private land. Approximately eight animals made up the original herd, but the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife estimates that the current Rattlesnake Herd consists of about 850 to 1,000 elk. Another 250

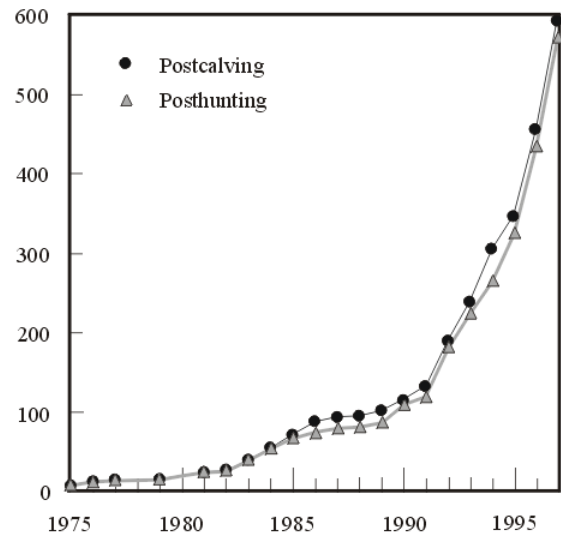


young will be added to the population during the spring of 1999. The herd is very healthy; antler and body size for some age classes, as well as the herd's reproductive rate, are among the highest recorded for this species. Hunting on private lands in the

vicinity harvests only about 5% of the herd per year. Consequently, growth of the Rattlesnake Herd is relatively unconstrained. A conservative estimate predicts that the Rattlesnake Herd could grow to 4,500 animals by the year 2010 if management practices remain unchanged. The adjacent chart shows the growth of the herd from 1975 through 1997, and the number of elk each year following the birth of calves in the spring (postcalving) and after the autumn hunting season (posthunting).

Biologists and land managers are concerned because of the increasing potential for vehicle-elk collisions, elk movement to radiation protection zones on central Hanford, damage to adjacent property (e.g., farmers' fences and crops), and damage to rare plant communities on the ALE Reserve. Beginning in 1996 elk were observed crossing the north side of SR 240, and the first vehicle-elk collision on SR 240 was reported during 1998.

During the CCP planning process, several options are being considered to reduce the size of the Rattlesnake Herd. The chosen method(s) must adhere to the primary objectives of the ALE Reserve, protecting its natural resources. Access, safety, costs, and logistics are other considerations in for-



Population growth of the Rattlesnake Herd (1975-1997)

mulating this elk management strategy. While elk are an integral part of the ecosystem, a responsible elk management plan will also ensure the future protection of the rare plants and sensitive habitats of the ALE Reserve for the enjoyment of future generations.

CCP Purpose Statement and Goals - One of the most important tasks in preparing a CCP for a National Wildlife Refuge involves the development of a purpose statement and accompanying goals. Once established, the CCP purpose statement and the goals are "cast in stone," and all activities planned for the refuge must be evaluated for compatibility with this purpose and these goals in mind. The purpose statement is the underlying reason for the establishment and long-term management of a refuge. The goals of the CCP reflect the purpose and set the management direction for the refuge.

Input received from the public, agencies, and tribes during the issues identification phase, as well as the direction provided by the mission of the FWS and applicable agreements, mandates, and laws, form the foundation on which the purpose and goals have been developed. Based on this, the Planning Team has developed the following purpose statement for the CCP:

To conserve and protect the natural and cultural resource values of the Hanford shrub-steppe ecosystem and to manage the ALE Reserve as a Research Natural Area.

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Reflecting this purpose, the following draft six goals for the ALE Reserve CCP are:

- Protect and conserve the native habitats and biodiversity of the Hanford shrub-steppe ecosystem.
- Monitor, protect, and recover plants and animals that are federally listed as threatened and endangered; proposed for federal listing; state listed as threatened, endangered, or sensitive; or candidates for state listing.
- Provide for compatible education, interpretive, and wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities.
- Promote public understanding of the shrub-steppe ecosystem through scientific research and allow other compatible research opportunities afforded by the unique and isolated environment of the ALE Reserve.
- Protect cultural and historical resources and allow for tribal access for traditional cultural uses compatible with the ALE Reserve.
- Provide for FWS and U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) operational and maintenance activities without compromising ecological and cultural values.

WHAT YOU TOLD US

The following discussion summarizes our initiatives to explore and understand the issues and opportunities relevant to the ALE Reserve. This includes input received from the public, agencies, tribes, and interest groups via meetings, response forms, site visits, and telephone discussions. This summary also identifies and reviews the key issues and opportunities of concern. Its purpose is to report back to you what we heard. In addition to aiding in understanding the scope of each concern, your input has helped serve as a foundation for the development of the purpose statement and goals for the CCP.

MAIL-IN RESPONSE FORM

If you do not plan to attend the first open house/public meeting, or would like to respond in writing, please consider answering the questions below and mailing back this page of the Planning Update to the FWS. Please mail any comments by January 21, 1999. We appreciate your input and look forward to hearing from you.

The wildlife refuge mission of the FWS includes providing for the wildlife-oriented activities listed below, when compatible with the purpose of the natural area. Please prioritize the following four activities for the ALE Reserve (1 being most important, 5 being least important):


- hunting
- wildlife observation
- photography
- environmental education
- interpretation

What do you see as the primary issues that need to be addressed in the Comprehensive Conservation Plan?

What is your vision for the future of the ALE Reserve?

Do you plan to attend the first open house/public meeting?

☐ yes ☐ no



Public Comments

We received written input from you via mail-in response forms in Planning Update #1 (December 1998) and at the first Open House/Public Meeting (January 1999). The intent of these forums was to explore what the public felt were the primary issues and opportunities of concern at the ALE Reserve, to get the public to prioritize potential (refuge mission) activities, and to provide their visions of the future for the ALE Reserve. The January meeting sought input at four open “stations” during the open house, through small (ten to twelve person) break-out groups during the meeting, and through worksheets either handed in at the end of the meeting or mailed back later on. The top five issues of concern/opportunities (ranked in order of priority — from most to least amount of input received) from the combined Planning Update response forms and public meeting worksheets, and the break-out groups are shown below:

Issue/Opportunity Ranking

Response Forms & Worksheets	Meeting Break-out Groups
1. Habitat protection/conservation	1. Habitat protection/conservation
2. Limit/restrict public access	2. Elk management/control
3. Elk management/control	3. Education opportunities
4. Research opportunities	4. Limit/restrict public access
5. Education opportunities	5. Research opportunities

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Input was also gathered, using the response forms and worksheets, on specific wildlife-oriented (refuge mission-specific) activities that could potentially occur at the ALE Reserve. Following is a summary of this input (activities are listed in order of importance/relevancy, with 1 being most important/relevant and 5 or 6 being least important/relevant):

Potential Activity Ranking

Response Forms	Meeting Worksheets*
1. Environmental education	1. Scientific research
2. Wildlife observation	2. Environmental education
3. Interpretation	3. Wildlife observation
4. Photography	4. Interpretation
5. Hunting	5. Photography
	6. Hunting

**Scientific Research was added as a category to the worksheets.*

The five most frequently mentioned visions from all sources of public input (response forms, worksheets, break-out groups) were:

1. Preserve/protect high-quality, pristine, shrub-steppe habitat (almost universal response).
2. No development/maintain as is/keep in undisturbed state (very common response).
3. Maintain research opportunities (common response).
4. Encourage environmental education (common response).
5. Limit access (common response).

Interest Group Response

The main concerns of The Nature Conservancy, Audubon Society, and the Partners for Arid Lands Stewardship (PALS) are for the continued protection and conservation of the ALE Reserve's shrub-steppe habitat. The Alliance for the Advancement of Science Through Astronomy (AASTA) would like to retain continued access to and ability to operate the telescope on Rattlesnake Ridge. The

University of California, Irvine and University of Washington would like continued access to and ability to conduct their collaborative gravitational physics experiments on the ALE Reserve.

Agency Response

The DOE, Benton County, Bonneville Power Authority (BPA), and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) provided input on their issues of concern and opportunities related to the ALE Reserve CCP. The DOE's primary concerns are protection of the area's natural and cultural resources, use of the area for continued research activities, and the growing elk herd. The WDFW's primary issue also relates to the fast-growing elk herd on the ALE Reserve. The BPA's main concern is continued access to its two large capacity (500 kilovolt) transmission lines that cross the site.

Benton County concerns include: (1) the consolidation of the Bureau of Land Management's withdrawn landholdings; (2) ensuring that the CCP is consistent with the Hanford Comprehensive Land Use Plan; (3) wildfire management and suppression; (4) weed control; (5) the short- and long-term management of the elk herd; (6) providing for appropriate public use and access on the ALE Reserve and controlling unauthorized access and uses; and (7) the Board of Commissioners' full participation in the planning process.

Tribal Response

The Hanford Site (of which the ALE Reserve is a part) is known to be rich in cultural resources and is still thought of as a homeland by many Native American people. Native Americans have retained traditional secular and religious ties to the Hanford Site and certain landmarks remain sacred to the tribes. The following three tribes and one band all have ties to the ALE Reserve: Yakama Indian Nation, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, Nez Perce Tribe, and the Wanapum People. The tribes' most frequently expressed concerns deal with tribal access and

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protection of the ALE Reserve's natural and cultural resources.

Conclusions

The overwhelming message from all input received focuses first and foremost on protecting, conserving, and enhancing the ALE Reserve's unique natural resource values. These are primarily its large and relatively intact shrub-steppe and arid land habitat, and its isolation and historically light human use. Other key messages include protecting the area's cultural resource values and providing access for continued research, as well as providing limited access for education, interpretation, and wildlife viewing. In general, there was almost a unanimous agreement of the basic viewpoint that the ALE Reserve should be protected.

NEXT STEPS IN THE PLANNING PROCESS

There is a lot of work to be done on the CCP and EA for the ALE Reserve over the next few months. As this Update goes to press, the Planning Team is in the process of developing several alternative management approaches for the ALE Reserve. The effects of these alternatives on the environment of the ALE Reserve and on local communities will then be evaluated in the EA. We will also be formulating the various objectives and strategies needed to accomplish the goals of the CCP. It is our aim to have the EA complete for public review in September 1999. The main focus of the next Planning Update, due to be published in July, will be to describe the alternative management approaches.

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address correction requested

